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The Immortals

Written by Amit Chaudhuri

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Amit Chaudhuri

The Immortals



ONEWORLD

A Oneworld Book

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Oneworld Publications
10 Bloomsbury Street
London WC1B 3SR
England

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'The mortals become immortals; the immortals become mortals.'

Heraclitus

Transformation

My days are pallid with the hard pummelling of work,
my nights are incandescent with waking dreams.
Arise from the clash of metals, O beautiful one, white fire-flame,
may the mass of matter become wind, the moon become woman,
may the flowers of the earth become the stars of the sky.
Arise, O sacred lotus, rise from the spirit's stalk,
free the eternal in the unfading forgiveness of the moment,
make the momentary eternal.
May the body become mind, the mind become spirit, the spirit
unite with death,
may death become body, spirit, mind.

Buddhadeva Bose
(trans. from Bengali by Ketaki Kushari Dyson)

* * *

THE NOTES OF Bhimpalasi emerged from a corner of the room. Panditji was singing again, impatient, as if he were taking his mind off something else. But he grew quite immersed: the piece was exquisite and difficult. He'd composed it himself seven years ago.

From not far away came the sound of traffic; the roundabout, bewildering in its congestion. Bullocks and cars ground around it. The bulls looked mired in their element; the buses and dusty long-distance taxis were waiting to move. The car horns created an anxious music, discordant but not indifferent.

The Panditji wasn't there: he'd died two years ago, after his third cardiac seizure. They had rushed him to Jaslok Hospital; on the way, in the car, he'd had his second heart attack. He had died in Jaslok, to the utter disbelief of his relatives: they hadn't thought that he'd been admitted to a hospital to die. Now, his presence, or his absence, persisted in the small seven-hundred-square-feet house. The singing had come from the tape recorder, from the tape the grandson had played accidentally, thinking it was a cassette of film songs.

'Yeh to dadaji ke gaane hai,' remarked the boy, recognising his grandfather's singing; was he surprised or disappointed? Next to him hung a portrait of his dadaji, enlarged from a photograph taken when he was fifty-seven. The face was an austere one, bespectacled, the oiled hair combed back. It was the face of – by common consensus in the family – a great man. The large forehead had been smeared with a tilak, as if someone had confused the portrait with a real person.

Already, the Panditji was becoming a sort of myth. It wasn't as if a large number of people knew him; but those who did divulged their knowledge with satisfaction. How well he sang Malkauns, for instance; how even Bade Ghulam Ali hesitated to sing Malkauns at a conference in Calcutta after Panditji had the previous day. How Panditji was a man of stark simplicity, despite his weakness for the occasional peg of whisky in the evening.

But it was certain that Panditji was proud, a man of prickly sensitivity. He had been a man silently aware of the protocol between student and teacher, organiser and performer, musician and musician. If slighted or rebuffed, he sealed off that part of the world that rebuffed him.

This severity had probably cost him. There was a story of how Lata Mangeshkar wanted a guru to train her in the finer points of classical music, and of how she had thought of him, Ram Lal, having heard his abilities as a teacher praised highly. 'You must call her, Panditji,' said a well-wisher. 'She is waiting for your call.' Panditji did not call.

'She should call me,' he said. 'If she wants to learn from me, she will call me.' The call did not come. In the meantime, Amir Khan telephoned her and said that he was at her disposal. Word spread quickly; Lata turned to the distinguished ustad; and Amir Khan became known as the man who had taught Lata Mangeshkar the subtler intricacies of classical music.

And yet, for all that, his reputation as a teacher had remained intact when he died; like something small and perfect, it had neither been subtracted from nor added to. People outside the family remembered him less and less; if asked 'Where did you learn that beautiful bandish?' they might say in a tone of remembrance, 'Oh I had learnt that from Pandit Ram Lal,' for people used to drift in and out of Panditji's life, and some became students for brief spells of time.

Shyamji's life was to be different. This was a simple determination, but it was not a conscious plan. *Consciously*, Panditji's life was the ideal life; when Shyamji mentioned it, it was as if he were speaking of a saint, and not of his father. That was all very well; but it was a life that could not be repeated.

Tonight was a night of upaas and jagran, an absurdity enforced ritually by the women. Shyamji succumbed meekly to being a witness. The abstention from food by the women, the singing of bhajans till dawn: these were necessary observances. Done repeatedly, they were meant

to lead to betterment. Instead, they led to acidity, and a grogginess and lack of focus that lasted two days. But they were undertaken in light-hearted camaraderie.

The children and the men were fed. Then night came; and they began to sing the bhajans. The children had fallen asleep without any prompting, as usual, in the midst of the chatter, their eyes closed in the bright light of the tube-light. The low, droning singing began; not tuneless, because this was a family of musicians, but strangely soothing. Half-asleep, Shyamji watched his wife and his sister and, with them, an older daughter, Neha: they were about to lull him to sleep. Nisha, his youngest daughter, had desperately wanted to stay awake, and join the chorus; but she had fallen asleep at a quarter to eleven. His mother sat in a corner, in a plain white sari, with an absent look, yet entirely alert. Shyamji had a dream into which was woven the sound of the chorus; in which his father was also present, both as a living person and as a portrait, hanging in a reddish light. This dream, about the vicissitudes of Shyamji's life, continued for a long time, taking one shape, then another. When he woke briefly, it was dawn; the women had vanished: they must have gone to bed, probably after having taken a glass of milk to break the fast. The room was silent, except for the noises coming in from outside.

Late one evening the door must have been left ajar – early evenings the doors were anyway wide open, to let in a continual trickle of visitors; people coming in and going out – but late one evening when the door was ajar, the rat

must have got in. No one had noticed. But it was Neha who saw it later that night, as she was stepping out of the bathroom. It had jumped out, and scooted behind the pots in the kitchen once again. Expectedly, Neha almost fainted. It was really a bandicoot; cats were scared of them. They ran down the gutters and, at night, scurried down the narrow passage that connected the houses of the colony. They had the aggressiveness and urgency of touts.

The children danced, half in fear and in excitement at an undefined peril. Shyamji's wife, never known to be particularly violent, had managed to chase it out with a jhadu; it darted through the kitchen window. Shyamji, not moving from the divan, was a picture of patience, and kept saying, as he did during most crises, 'Arrey bhai, pareshan mat hona, don't get agitated.'

* * *

On the way to the city in the mornings, he'd stop at Peddar Road sometimes, at his wife's brother's place; going up a steep incline and entering a compound that was not visible from the main road. Here, they lived in a single-storey house not far from a posh girls' school.

'Hari om,' he said as he entered. It was an old joke, this invocation to God, a part of Shyamji's 'fun' mode: it meant he was hot, and that he was here, needing attention. 'Water, jijaji?' asked the woman sitting near the doorstep; she had covered part of her face with her sari the moment he had stepped in. Shyamji nodded; then added affectionately: 'Cold.' He lowered himself onto the mat and sighed.

It was in this house, oddly, that he'd first seen Lata Mangeshkar. She, sitting on the little divan in her white sari, talking to the members of the household in her baby-like voice. She had seemed tiny to Shyamji. He glanced at her; although her songs often floated about in his head, he was, at that moment, curious about what she looked like, sounded like. They brought her puris and potatoes on a

plate – it seemed she'd asked for them specifically – and she ate them carefully and said: 'I love eating anything Arati makes.' Arati was married to Motilal, Shyamji's wife's brother: everyone knew she was a good cook. A small cordon of family members, of children and cousins intermittently talking to each other, had formed itself around Lata. He was introduced to her as Ram Lal's son, and at this she showed a passing flicker of interest. When you are introduced to the great, you have a fleeting impression that they have taken in your features and your name, and that they'll remember you the next time you meet. Shyamji was happy to pay his respects with a namaskar, then retreat into the background.

Later, when she was practising a song with Motilalji – without accompaniment, without harmonium – he was surprised that he could not hear her. He then went a little closer; the familiar voice became audible, small and sharp. So this is what a microphone could do!

Motilalji himself was a marvellous singer, astonishingly accomplished; but this was the pinnacle of his achievement – to have his talent mutedly applauded by Lata, to give her a few tunes for the bhajans she sang, to accompany her on the harmonium at the occasional public concert she gave, and to act as a filler during those concerts: that is, to sing a song or two when she wasn't singing, and the audience was distracted, going out for coffee or to the toilet. At first, they'd all thought it was a miracle – a result of 'bhagya', fate – this conjunction with Lata Mangeshkar, and it was expected that, when the time came, she'd surely

'do' something for him. But she hadn't 'done' anything for him; he had continued to be her filler, he hadn't become a music director. What *could* she do? explained the family. But the relationship with Lata, to all outward purposes, was cordial; it could even be described as 'particularly close'.

Part of Motilalji's problem was drink; no use blaming others for a self-inflicted problem. Drink made him more solitary; late in the evening, he would sit alone, talking to himself. The rest of the day, if he was sober, he was abrasive; as if the world somehow displeased him. And his talent became a problematic responsibility he did not know what to do with; it was as if, having given so much to his gift – hard work, practice – he wanted something in return; and not having got that 'something', whatever it might be, he had decided to punish both himself and everyone around him.

Motilalji came into the room, looked around him, and appeared barely to notice his brother-in-law. But he had noticed him of course; 'Bhaiyya, at this time of the morning?' he said.

'No, I had a moment,' said Shyamji, 'and I thought I'd stop for a glass of water.'

'Well, did you get it?'

'I did, and it gave much ananda,' said Shyamji.

Motilalji seemed to mull over this remark and dismiss it. He came to Shyamji and for the first time looked him in the eye.

'Where are you going now?' he asked; Shyamji smelled

drink on his breath. Although the smell revolted Shyamji, he kept his expression amenable. He noticed that Motilalji's teeth, bared briefly, had flecks of paan on them.

'I was going to see a chela of mine at twelve o'clock, but I'm in no hurry – he'll wait.'

Shyamji thought of this student of his, an enthusiastic young man whose voice kept going off-key, and put him out of his mind.

Motilalji patted his hair and smoothed his creased kurta. 'Come with me then,' he said, glancing at a mirror, and then at his watch.

It turned out that they were going to Cumballa Hill. This was not far away, and they might have walked it in half an hour. But Motilalji had lavish tastes; as they descended from the small hill on which the house stood, he hailed a taxi. They sat at the back, Shyamji wondering if they could have taken a bus. 'Arrey, who will take a bus for such a short distance! And these buses tire me – I am not well.' He looked distractedly before him.

Besides, no bus would have taken them straight to the building. Motilalji began to hum with a sour expression on his face, as if he was never on holiday from his talent and vocation, and resented the fact, as the taxi made the round from Peddar Road to Kemp's Corner, and then turned right at the Allah Beli Café and continued down the straight lane. Shyamji, by contrast, was wide-eyed and curious, as if he was still not bored by this area. He was also silent. The small intermission of the journey seemed to have mixed up daydream and reality for him. He watched the sunlight fall on the different buildings; the

old, deceptively homely but expensive shops on Kemp's Corner; the multi-storeyed buildings in the lane in which mainly Gujaratis lived, with their sense of crowdedness; then the sense of spaciousness again as they turned into the hill, with its older buildings.

They came now to an old, large, three-storeyed house. 'Arrey, dekho,' said Motilalji, 'I have only two rupees change in my pocket. These fellows will never have change for a hundred rupee note. Give him five rupees, will you, Shyam?' and with that he got out of the taxi. Shyamji noticed, as he fished resignedly in his kurta pocket, that Motilalji's dhoti was quite shabby. But he was not drunk; he was walking straight. They went up a single floor in an old lift, one that apparently never caught the sunlight. In a way that was both unworldly and dramatic, Motilalji rang the bell next to a large door with a brass nameplate.

The door was opened by an ageing bearer, a grey-haired Malyali, who'd grown inured to the incursion of people like Motilalji into the flat. Certain skills brought you into contact with the well-to-do, he'd decided; and in his thirty years as cleaner, boy, and bearer, he'd seen a range of skills. Besides, the lady of the house liked singing; the people he'd worked for had always had interesting hobbies, and he preferred the employers that had hobbies to the ones that didn't have any. He was accomplished enough to feign a look of tolerance and respect toward Motilalji; he didn't know the other man. Then, with an approximation of childlike enthusiasm, he padded off barefoot towards the bedroom to say, 'Memsaab, music teacher has come!'

Motilalji sat on the sofa with a sort of half-smile on his

face, while Shyamji turned his head momentarily to look at the flat; glancing back quickly over his shoulder, he saw the potted plants in the veranda. Motilalji leaned towards him to say something; but the lady was approaching them; he cleared his throat.

'Mallika,' he said, 'I hope you don't mind that I brought my dewar with me!'

The dewar, the brother-in-law, looked a bit startled; he felt, more than ever, that he was in someone else's house, and that he'd been manipulated by Motilalji for a reason only he knew. He was also surprised, and mildly offended, that Motilalji referred to the lady by her name, rather than 'Mallikaji' or 'didi'.

The lady smiled and nodded at Shyamji. John came out of the room with a harmonium, and placed it on the carpet.

'She's been learning from me for seven–eight months now,' said Motilalji. 'You should listen to her – she has a good voice. She's very proud though.'

Shyamji quailed. He pretended he hadn't heard.

'My dewar's name is Shyam – Shyam Lal,' said Motilalji. 'The late', and he glanced at the heavens, 'Pandit Ram Lal's son. He's quite a good singer, and a teacher too. He's still young, though.'

The lady and Motilalji sat down to sing. First the parping sound of the harmonium, not very musical; then the lady began singing, while Motilalji sat there, feigning boredom. Her voice was full-throated, surprisingly melodious.

'Wah, didi!' said Shyamji after she'd finished; then

Motilalji went through the motions – they could be called nothing else – of a lesson without bothering to raise his voice, but almost humming her a tune, which she followed assiduously, nodding appreciatively.

There was a break, and John brought them tea. Shyamji stirred his cup thoughtfully, and Motilalji declaimed,

'You must practise this song, Mallika! And you have to get the pronunciation right!'

Mallika Sengupta had been trying to get the pronunciation right. In every way she liked being in Bombay; but as a singer she'd been temporarily unmoored, and had to find her bearings, and explore avenues she'd once never thought of exploring. These avenues mainly comprised bhajans and ghazals, so popular in Bombay. She'd had to take a deep breath to get round to them, of course. She'd never taken Hindi songs seriously when growing up; even though she'd heard the Hindi songs of Saigal and Kanan-bala, they were film songs, there was a prejudice against them in her family. Now, more than thirty years later, she found herself faced with these languages; the onus was on her, in the daytime loneliness of her flat, to get her tongue round Hindi and Urdu vowels and consonants.

Her metier was the Bengali song, the Tagore-song – naturally. Everything she said in Hindi, thus, sounded a bit like Bengali. But the Bengaliness of her voice – its rounded full-throatedness – is also what made her sound charming to her music teachers; they would prick up their ears and search for analogies: 'You sing like Kanandevi,' they'd say; or, 'You sing like Geeta Dutt!' Kanandevi had long

turned to religion; Geeta Dutt had gone out of circulation prematurely; in the age of Lata, Mrs Sengupta's voice was certainly different.

Mrs Sengupta's voice evoked a 'golden age'. When people heard it in this drawing room, when they closed their eyes they couldn't believe it, they felt they'd been transported, somehow, to an earlier, to a better time. Secretly, one or two of them might think the voice 'old fashioned'; but it wasn't at all; it was simply out of place in the zeitgeist. The zeitgeist was Lata's voice, thin, small, and, to Mrs Sengupta's ears, shrill. This was the reigning definition of a female singing voice. Mallika Sengupta's voice's moment had passed, at least for now, though neither she nor anyone else could be conscious of this fact; passed, unless it was rediscovered in the distant, as-yet unimaginable future, unless a change of taste were brought about by a future generation and it cared to remember Mallika Sengupta.

Her beginnings were in a small town in North Bengal where her father had been an advocate. Her family had had social pretensions in the small town, but had swiftly fallen from grace after her father's death when she was twelve. The family struggled; but the cultural pretensions survived, as did the talent and intelligence. Her own talent was least nurtured, because she was a girl. It was almost a lucky break that she met and married Apurva Sengupta.

At first she'd refused him; she laughed now when she thought of it. She laughed; but at the time it had been no laughing matter. She was not in love, she thought; and, even as the daughter in a large family run only partly